

# FROM THE RHETORIC OF LONGINUS TO THE POETICS OF JOHN DENNIS

## THE ROLE OF TERROR IN THE THEORIES OF THE SUBLIME IN THE 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

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Within the huge literary and artistic tradition of the sublime in Western culture, mapping, analysing and interpreting the relations of literary and visual sublime is a highly complex issue.<sup>1</sup> The affective qualities within the sublime are usually connected to the aesthetic categories of *greatness*, *infinity* and *terror* as well as to philosophical concepts of the *transcendental*. This paper endeavours to interpret the sublime as a possible aesthetic form of an ontological insight that is not gained through conventional syllogisms.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the paper also investigates the role of terror in the rhetorical

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<sup>1</sup> I will dwell on art theory and art history only where it seems necessary for the coherence of the argumentation, and due to the limits of this study, this restriction will be applied to the theological implications of the sublime as well.

<sup>2</sup> Though this statement has been pre-eminently valid since the Kantian discussion of the sublime, still with regard to classical philosophy, it is plausible to argue for a similar meaning already in Greek philosophy, especially Neoplatonism and the tradition of Hermes Trismegistos, and thereby Alexandrian Hermetism. See Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction*

and poetical theories of the sublime which are based on aesthetic qualities which are not built upon cognition. How can one associate classical artistic notions, mostly within the theories of Plato and Longinus, with the modern aesthetics of the sublime, pre-eminently shaped by Burke and Kant? How is terror as the major source of the sublime intertwined with imaginative and enthusiastic aesthetic elements in the literary and visual tradition of the sublime? The basis for these assumptions and questions is that, in Greek aesthetics and beyond, rhetorical, imaginative and metaphysical qualities were all considered to be affective to human nature.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore and examine some aspects of how the rhetorical notion of the sublime influenced early 18<sup>th</sup>-century British literary critics, who elaborated on it so as to gradually transform the sublime from its original, narrower and stricter rhetorical interpretation, hallmarked by Longinus, towards a more imaginative and empiricist psychological aesthetic category. Within this realm of early 18<sup>th</sup>-century British literary aesthetics I set out to investigate the theory of the sublime by John Dennis through three of his major works (*The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry* (1701), *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704), and *Of Simplicity in Poetical Compositions, in Remarks on the 70th Spectator* (1711) and some of his minor writings. The study also explores how the early 18<sup>th</sup>-century concept of the sublime developed towards that aesthetic concept which had terror as its major source in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century theories of Burke and Kant. As I will argue, John Dennis stands at the beginning of this tradition in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and he was one of the first among the British literary critics of this period, who reinterpreted the rhetorical tradition of the Longinian sublime, and reconceptualised it by using the physico-theological insights of Thomas Burnet (*Sacred Theory of Earth*, 1681).

The paper hypothesises that while the enthusiastic and passionate aspects of the sublime originate not only from 18<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy, but rather from Greek peripathetic rhetorical theory and Platonic philosophy, yet the ontological and psychological significance of *terror* in the sublime becomes elaborated only in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The relevance of this research question and statement is also reinforced by the fact that studies on terror and the sublime have mushroomed recently, which is also attested by the convening of the conference on *Terror(ism) and Aesthetics*. In addition,

as an outcome of the philosophical and aesthetic considerations conceived with these aims, I intend to offer an interpretation of the sublime through the ideas of John Dennis.

As for the structure of the paper, a short philosophical investigation on how various postmodern thinkers, first of all, Jean-François Lyotard, Hans Bertens and Guy Sircello, rephrased the problem of the sublime is followed by a longer section, in which I elaborate on how the Burkean and the Kantian sublime can be reinterpreted from the perspective of the Longinian tradition. Finally, the question is investigated how the sublime can be hypothesised as an affective source for human insights.

Some poststructuralist aesthetic theories about the sublime appear as fashionable concepts with three well-identifiable critical points. First, according to Guy Sircello, the *epistemological transcendence* means that imagination overpowers cognition in sensing the sublime. Thus, thinking is disabled, therefore, the theory of the sublime is impossible to be created, because theoretical working-out necessarily relies on cognition, which is in this case overwritten by excess imagination.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, the notion of *ontological transcendence* refers to the fact that the sublime has its effects on human beings, thus it exists, if only in an unreachable way, as a consequence of the former transcendence.<sup>4</sup> Whereas, finally, according to the poststructuralist critic, Jean-François Lyotard, the concept of *radical openness* in general implies that the sublime presents the unrepresentable: the lack of the *validity* of reality yields an invention of other realities, as pointed out by Hans Bertens:

an art of negation, a perpetual negation [...] based on a neverending critique of representation that should contribute to the preservation of heterogeneity, of optimal dissensus [...] [it] does not lead towards a resolution; the confrontation with the unrepresentable leads to radical openness.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Guy Sircello, "How is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?", *The Journal of Aesthetic and Art Criticism* 51/4 (Fall 1993): 542-50.

<sup>4</sup> Sircello, "How is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?", 542-50.

<sup>5</sup> Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* (London: Routledge, 2005), 128. For its wider context see Jean-François Lyotard, "The Interest of the Sublime," in *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, ed. and trans. Jeffrey Librett (New York: State University of New York, 1993), 109-33.

However, while postmodernism revisits this basic ontological question with a critical theoretical refinement and builds it into its terminology,<sup>6</sup> I think it does not produce fundamentally new perspectives or interpretations of the sublime. Because the very tradition — in the form postmodern critical thinkers refer to them — that began with Longinus and continued much later with Kant, in itself carries this contradiction between the eidetic and ontic aspects of the sublime. In addition, if this aesthetic and philosophic tradition is reconsidered, Hans Bertens' conclusion of an emerging "radical openness" acquires a more complex meaning.

Authors of classical antiquity interpreted the sublime in a rhetorical-formal way with its final intention of exciting delight and affection in the audience of the orator. The *genus sublime*, also known as the *genus grande*, was the strongest among the three basic rhetorical modes (*genus tenue, mediocre et grande*), and it united a large variety of rhetorical elements. Though many authors can be pinpointed as significant within this rhetorical tradition, for our discussion, it is Longinus, or occasionally called Pseudo-Longinus, who in his work, entitled *Peri hypsous (On the Sublime)*<sup>7</sup>, united these rhetorical features and inevitably stands as the very source of the modern tradition of the sublime. Albeit his person is much debated, yet he most probably lived in Rome in 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. In that period the capital city of the Roman Empire was the centre of elitist classicism and 'Greek renaissance' within Latin culture that implied emulation and confrontation with the Greek tradition.<sup>8</sup> It is this vivid and exuberant context that inspired Longinus, the Greek philologist, to write his treatise on a topic which had been taken up by numerous authors in the previous centuries, including Theophrastos, Cornificius, Cicero, or Horace.

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<sup>6</sup> Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History*, 126-28.

<sup>7</sup> For the questions of authorship and dating, see Nagy Ferenc, "Auctor Peri Hypsous — A kifejezés mód fenségéről szóló irodalomtudományi mű szerzője," *Egyetemes Philologiai Közlöny* (1935): 363-78; "Pseudo-Longinus," in *Der neue Pauly: Enzyklopädie der Antike*, ed. Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider, vol. 10. (Stuttgart-Weimar, Metzler: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2001), 513-14; Adamik Tamás, *Antik stíluselméletek* (Budapest: Seneca, 1998), 169-72; G. A. Kennedy, *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 306; Donald A. Russell, *Longinus: On Sublimity* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1965), x-xi; Donald A. Russell, "Longinus Revisited," *Mnemosyne* 34 (1981): 72-73; Longinus, *On Great Writing. (On the Sublime)*, ed. and trans. George M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991), xvii-xxi.

<sup>8</sup> Kennedy, *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, 307-08.

Longinus conceived the sublime by using original compositions of the peripathetic rhetorical practice and Platonic ideas on intuition and beauty to bring about a new reception theory with a unique literary technique.<sup>9</sup> The sublime appeared as the manifestation and result of the interplay of congenial and great thoughts, strong emotions, rhetorical modes, artistic performance, and an elevated style. The way Longinus unites the Platonic interpretation and the rhetorical technique of the *genus sublime*, thus constructing a new meaning for the sublime, is indispensable to understand the transformation of the concept from a purely rhetorical to a more imaginative and affective notion.<sup>10</sup>

In a similar fashion to his Greek contemporaries, Longinus relied on peripathetic and Platonic thoughts on artistic creation.<sup>11</sup> With respect to the ideas of greatness, beauty, affection and partly perfection, Longinus dwelt on the idea of harmony with respect to sublimity,<sup>12</sup> which is one of the primary propositions of Kant as well concerning the interplay of imagination and cognition. Plato, when discussing poetic and rhetorical truth, rejects mimesis on ethical and ontological grounds. However, not entirely: those artistic forms which are nearest to the abstract ideas they represent and are thereby based on the invention (*heuresis*) of eternal and universal principles, are ethically acceptable. As for art, music and poetry, and subsequently, beauty and harmony (sublimity is not distinguished from beauty in early Greek thought) had to have a constant or fixed point of reference. If they are capable of representing the *eidos*, the universal concept in each and every phenomenon, then they are nearer to the idea.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, Plato revered Homer, recognised the power in his poetry, which he attributed to the fact that the master managed to reach Beauty, which is a constant

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<sup>9</sup> Mats Malm, "On the Technique of the Sublime," *Comparative Literature* 52/1 (Winter 2000): 1-10; Mark D. Usher, "Theomachy, Creation, and the Poetics of Quotation in Longinus Chapter 9," *Classical Philology* 102 (2007): 292-303.

<sup>10</sup> For examples of the literary compilation technique in order to achieve the sublime aesthetic effect, see Longinus, *On the Sublime*, 11-16.

<sup>11</sup> D. C. Innes, "Longinus and Caecilius: Models of the Sublime," *Mnemosyne*, 55/3 (2002): 259-84.

<sup>12</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, I-II. In the case of Longinus' work, the Roman numbers refer to whole chapters, in which the author discusses the topic referred to.

<sup>13</sup> Plato, *Republic* 475d-476b, *Symposium* 210e; for Platonic works I only indicated the section markers without the page numbers because in many cases certain themes recur at different parts of the section. For the references of the dialogues see Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, *Plato: the Collected Dialogues* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961); Allan Bloom, ed. and trans., *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

principle only accessible to philosophers, and to one who can imperviously lead the souls wherever he wants (*psychagogy*). This most affective ability is not residing in the *eidos*, it is not eidetic beauty, though it has to meet certain prescribed measures not to appear mean or fustian. The affective force is subsequently not resulting from them. In the Platonic dialogue, *Ion*, Socrates derives this ability of Ion from divine origins.<sup>14</sup> It is not *techné* that makes Ion a magnetic musician and actor (*rhapsodos*), but his enthusiasm (*enthusiasmos*). Therefore, the enthusiastic *rhapsodos* unites the eidetic and non-eidetic elements of sublime art by intuitive identification, by his moving emotions and the terrible manifestations of his imagination in a harmonious way that makes him attractive to the audience.<sup>15</sup> In turn, if an artistic creation or phenomenon meets this principle, which nevertheless retains an aspect that cannot be fully comprehended, then that artwork or object attains a perfect affective power to the human mind. It is also a source and explanation residing within the affective power of the Kantian sublime which has its origins in classical conceptions of the sublime, reinterpreted and transmitted by Longinus.

Notwithstanding this theoretical refinement, Kant also had a direct source and forerunner in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century treatise of the Irish philosopher, historian, and politician, Edmund Burke.<sup>16</sup> Burke also distinguished the sublime from beauty, since he thought that sublime is an external objective quality which is reflected in its effects, and can be recognised through these effects. In his essay, Burke provides an “objective” natural spectroscopy among which one can distinguish categories and aesthetic judgments directed by our Taste. The most common causes of the sublime according to his wide view are: obscurity, the idea of power, vacuity, darkness, solitude, silence, infinity, nature, large objects, and uniformity.<sup>17</sup> In addition, sublime comes with the feeling of terror, astonishment and reverence. “Indeed, terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime”.<sup>18</sup> He also states that “astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended,

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<sup>14</sup> Plato, *Ion* 536a.

<sup>15</sup> Plato, *Ion* 534c-d.

<sup>16</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> Burke, *Enquiry*, Part I, 2, 3-23. In the case of Burke's work, the Arabic numbers refer to chapters and subchapters.

<sup>18</sup> Burke, *Enquiry*, 2, 2.

with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, not by consequence reason on that object which employs it".<sup>19</sup> For Burke sublime can also be an imitation of a great talent in literary works of art that have effects, such as astonishment, admiration, and grandeur, similar to natural phenomena.<sup>20</sup> Therefore to copy and compete with a genius appears as an ambition in order to create something *original*: imitation is thus anti-mimetic, or, more precisely, mimetic and non-mimetic at the same time, which results in a creative (re)thinking of artistic expression. As it has been pointed out, this idea was basically entertained by Plato and subsequently Longinus when discussing the artistry of the *enthusiastic rhapsodos*.

In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant discussed the sublime as being different from beauty, since sublimity incites strong emotions, respect and fear from the spectator, but at the same time, it gives delight and joy. It points beyond the sensuous world, reaching out to infinity. Human beings are capable of perceiving either sublime objects, such as the ocean, or a huge mountain, (*mathematical sublime*), or sublime forces, such as a storm, or a volcano (*dynamical sublime*). During the latter process, our imagination arrives at a disharmony with cognition (judgment), since the cognitive part tries to reach totality, attempts to grasp reality in its entirety, but is incapable of receiving the sublime as a whole (as the sublime is infinite and affective). In the former case, the "collapse" of cognition enables us only to conceptualise the object as a mathematical progression without being able to imagine it, and it leads to the certainty of ideas. That is precisely the reason why Kant contrasted sublimity with beauty: beauty is always framed and finite and it can be grasped with our understanding. As for the sublime, it is unintelligible, since it cannot be conceptualised, yet one elevates the idea of the totality of one's own mind over the sensation of the sublime (and the source of one's joy). Thus human beings transcend themselves over nature, being aware that they are superior to it and its phenomena, as they are free to elevate themselves beyond sublimity.<sup>21</sup> The aesthetics of the sublime can have subsequently no conceptual framework. Language can never make it wholly intelligible and com-

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<sup>19</sup> Burke, *Enquiry*, 2, 1.

<sup>20</sup> Burke, *Enquiry*, Part V, 1-6.

<sup>21</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), §23-28, *passim*.

municable, according to Kant, since only conceptual thoughts can be explicated and communicated. Consequently, one needs intuition and imagination to decipher sublime aesthetics through poetry or art.<sup>22</sup>

Though Burke's ideas on the sources of the sublime are the primary sources for Kant as well, Burke's empirical interpretation strongly differs from Kant's ideas on reflective aesthetic judgments, which are metaphysical in their nature. In the Kantian sublime there is a conflict between judgment and imagination within the sublime, wherein imagination cannot articulate the desire of the totality of the judgment. The imbalance, the lack of harmony in the mind between imagination and judgment is solved so that judgment raises the mind to a level of abstract freedom where it can face with nature as a totality and finally overcome it, thus creating a balance between imagination and cognition. Consequently, a considerable difference lies in the fact that for Kant the sublime is only present in the mind, and it is far from being an objective empirical quality as it is for Burke.

However, at the same time, it is quite obvious that poetic or artistic acts imply constructedness, that is, *techné*. As it has been explained so far, the role of *techné* in sublimity is as old as the tradition of the sublime itself. Plato's *Ion* points towards non-rhetoric, non-eidetic origins of the sublime along with the already existing rhetorical tradition. Socrates was explaining to Ion that divine poetic powers are gifted to the poet, channelled through his art while the poet is inspired and filled with holy awe (*enthusiasmos*). On the contrary, the rhetorical interpretation of the sublime style (*genus grande*) views the sublime as an effect raised by the orator through the refined and systematic application of figures and tropes (*schemata dianoeias et lexeos*).

In order to endeavour to explicate this duality of the nature of the sublime, and to argue for the hypothesis put forward in the introduction, namely, that the affective scope of the sublime began to expand in 18<sup>th</sup>-century British aesthetics, which is hallmarked by its reinterpretation by John Dennis, it is worth looking at a different interpretation of the epistemological and ontological problem posed by the sublime. In or-

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<sup>22</sup> Sublime aesthetics "is very powerful in creating, as it were, another nature out of the material which the real one gives it [...] it is really the art of poetry in which the faculty of aesthetic ideas can reveal itself in its full measure [...] give imagination an impetus to think more, although in an undeveloped way, than can be comprehended in a concept, and hence in a determinate linguistic expression," Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 192-93 (§49).



der to provide further reinforcement to my argument, it is now worth revisiting the treatise of Longinus and the theory of the sublime by John Dennis.

Longinus originates the sublime from five sources that arise from *physis* (tendency toward elevated thought or *enthusiastic pathos* — the latter is also a Platonic idea), or from *techné* (*schemata dianoeias and lexeos*, that is, tropes and figures; *phrasis*, and *synthesis*).<sup>23</sup> The hypothesis for the latter group of sources is that words are harmoniously allocated like musical notes in a congenial composition. And since harmony is innate to human beings, if it meets the former preconditions of *physis*, it has the effect of touching the soul.<sup>24</sup> *Physis* and *techné* are subsequently necessarily supplementary. Besides Plato, Longinus dwells on the peripathetic rhetorical tradition that had gradually developed in Greek rhetoric since Gorgias and Aristotle, which assumes that *techné*, literally conceived, also arises from nature (*phainen*).<sup>25</sup> Therefore, Longinus thinks that only art can reveal nature, but at the same time art conceals itself through *techné*: *physis* disappears.<sup>26</sup> In addition, every art is limited in the sense that it transforms *physis* into a “static form”. Presentation appears as knowledge (*mathésis*) but a knowledge that is inherently limited, while great art requires great talent (*genius*). However, according to Longinus, even a genius must rely on art.

Nature supplies the first main underlying elements in all cases, but study enables one to define the right moment and appropriate measure on each occasion, and also provides steady training and practice. [...] Great qualities are too precarious when left to themselves, unsteadied and unballasted by knowledge, abandoned to mere impulse and untutored daring; they need the bridle as well as the spur. Demosthenes shows that this is true in everyday life when he says that while the greatest blessing is good fortune, the second, no less important, is good counsel, and that the absence of the second utterly destroys the first. We might apply it to literature, with talent in the place of fortune and art in that of counsel. The clinching proof is that only by means of art can we perceive the fact that certain

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<sup>23</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, Section 7.

<sup>24</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, Section 39.

<sup>25</sup> This idea repeats the original theory of mimesis by Aristotle. Aristotle, *Physics*, Book B: 194a. For the works of Aristotle I only indicated the section and caput markers without the page numbers because in many cases certain themes recur at different parts of the section. For the references of the dialogues see *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941).

<sup>26</sup> Nature loves to conceal itself (*physis kruptesthai philei*) is a thought attributed to Heraclitus in the classical tradition.

literary effects are due to sheer inborn talent. If, as I said, those who object to literary criticism would ponder these things, they would, I think, no longer consider the investigation of our subject extravagant or useless.<sup>27</sup>

If sublime art is the achievement of the genius whose art is based on *techné* as a development out of nature, then the question arises how it is actually achieved. The Longinian idea implies that the genius elevates his art by imitation (*mimesis*) and emulation (*zélōtis*). But even this *mimesis* is not a technical one. It is rather something “mysterious” like a contagion. This idea is taken up by Kant when he discusses that the essence with which the genius vests art cannot be transmitted, it is unique because it does not rest on any concept (and only conceptual phenomena are communicable). The genius is not acting on rational grounds when creating art.<sup>28</sup> *Mimesis* of the congenial art is subsequently non-mimetic, it is not imitation (*Nachahmung*), but creative rethinking of the heritage with the elements of inheritance (*Nachfolge*).<sup>29</sup> It is rather agonic competition, the engine of which, according to Longinus, is impression by ethos (*apotypōsis*), for instance, a beautiful plastic artwork, or a good performance. Though in great art *techné* is an ally to nature, it is different in the case of the beautiful, where it is perfection and harmonious resemblance to humans (*eidetic beauty*), and in the case of the sublime, where it rather rests on *logos*, on non-eidetic origins. In this latter instance, *techné* works best if it is concealed from view, wherein *physis* is allowed to be presented as natural pathos.<sup>30</sup> The *logos* of the sublime is thus a true *logos*, since it unveils. But it also needs delicacy, disguise which is the very essence of veiling the unveiled (*dialanthanē*). And the tool for disguise is the shining or light of the figure (*dèlon oti tō phōti autō*). As Longinus points out:

We should not here omit, dear friend, though we shall deal with it very briefly, a subject we have studied, namely, that figures naturally reinforce greatness and are wonderfully supported by it in turn. I shall explain why and how this happens. The cunning use of figures arouses a peculiar suspicion in the hearer’s mind, a

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<sup>27</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, Section 2, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 186-97.

<sup>29</sup> Kant adds that the disciple needs to meet the original sources again that the genius originally used, and at the same time it has to learn the mode of availing himself of these sources. See Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 162-64, 186-91.

<sup>30</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, Section 35.

feeling of being deliberately trapped and misled. This occurs when we are addressing a single judge with power of decision, and especially a dictator, a king, or an eminent leader. He is easily angered by the thought that he is being outwitted like a silly child by the expert speaker's pretty figures; he sees in the fallacious reasoning a personal insult; sometimes he may altogether give way to savage exasperation, but even if he controls his anger he remains impervious to persuasion.

That is why the best use of a figure is when the very fact that it is a figure goes unnoticed. Now greatness and passion are a wonderful help and protection against the suspicions aroused by the use of figures; cunning techniques, when overlaid with beauty and passion, disappear from view and escape all further suspicion. [...] How has an orator there concealed the figure? Clearly, by its very brilliance. Just as dimmer lights are lost in the surrounding sunshine, so pervading grandeur all around obscures the presence of rhetorical devices. Something not very different happens in painting: light and shade are represented by colors on the same plane, yet the light is seen first, it not only stands out but seems much nearer. In the same way, great and passionate expressions affect our minds more closely; by a kind of natural kinship and brilliance they are seen before the figures, whose artistry they overshadow and keep hidden.<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, on the basis of what has been said so far, the sublime can be interpreted as shining — the “truth” of great art, the appearance of its radiance (*phainesthai diaprotèta*). But the real essence of art remains cryptical, since light casts it into the shadow (*ekphanestaton*). In addition, the “Longinian shining” or light metaphors are supplemented by heliotropes in the sense Jacques Derrida refers to them.

It is pointed out in one of the studies of Jacques Derrida that *heliotropism* is one of those deep undercurrents in Western philosophy that constantly return in diverse forms. One might also add that in cultural representations as well. Sun and sunlight metaphors, such as tropes of light, brilliance, and resplendence, all imply a metaphysical assumption of vision as well.<sup>32</sup> Thus I think the sublime can also be seen as a transmitter, a channel, or, at the very least, an intermittent dimension, but at the same time a gateway as well, through which a nonrepresentational quality and a prohibition, crystallised in the inscription, could be played out. Therefore, the sublime not only unites

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<sup>31</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, Section 17, 29.

<sup>32</sup> Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology,” in Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 207-71.

tropes of light and shadow, but also poses a possibility of problematising ontological and epistemological limits and non-limits.<sup>33</sup> Longinus sees Homer writing the *Odyssey* as a setting sun.<sup>34</sup> He also refers to the Book of Genesis ('Fiat lux!'), as an instance of pure epiphany.<sup>35</sup>

However, this shining has to be sought for, needs to be cleared. The motive power hereby is human yearning: nature implanted in us the ability of contemplations and the urge to rival our predecessors, the yearning that cannot be overcome (*érôs*) for great things, for the divine beyond the earthly realm (*daimoniôteron*).<sup>36</sup> Thus humans are, as Lacoue-Labarthe argues, "meta-ontic", "metacosmic beings."<sup>37</sup> The source of astonishment or terror when sublime emerges is this very clarification, the unveiling of our transcendence beyond finite and rational limitations. The essence of the sublime is subsequently "beyond the light", and is in turn in contrast to beauty as appearance.<sup>38</sup>

Consequently, in a philosophical sense it is plausible to argue for this aspect of terror in the sublime as a valid source of insight into truth or in the case of art, into its essence. And even if the sublime does not lead to "truth" in any conceptually conceived way, still it conveys a presentation of the unrepresentable, thus validating and consolidating non-rational ways of attaining knowledge of human existence. In my opinion, this is what Guy Sircello summarized in the relation under the terms of *epistemological* and *ontological transcendence*. Nevertheless, as it has been shown, the Longinian basis holds a very similar proposition as partly repeated and reinterpreted in Burke's and Kant's theories: a larger scheme which serves as a representation of the unity of terror, fear, pity and joy on a deeper, half-subconscious level (*sub-limen* — i.e. below the threshold). Thus, this seems to answer the problem of *epistemological transcendence*: the reality of the sub-limen cannot be perceived directly (non-real), hence

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<sup>33</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, "L'Offrande sublime," *Poésie* 30 (1984): 76-103.

<sup>34</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, Section 9.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, Section 35.

<sup>37</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and David Kuchta, "Sublime Truth (Part 2)," *Cultural Critique* 20 (Winter 1991): 225.

<sup>38</sup> For a further elucidation of how veiling and unveiling functions concerning the presentation of the unrepresentable, and the non-rational ways of attaining knowledge of human existence see Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Colophon, 1971), 17-87; Martin Heidegger, *The Will to Power as Art*, trans. David Farrell Krell, vol. 1. *Nietzsche* (New York: Harper, 1979), 80, 109-10.

an invention of the reality of the sublime becomes possible in the human mind. Consequently, using Sircello's concept again, the *ontological transcendence* opens up a vista for gaining an aesthetic though valid knowledge of the world.

Nonetheless, the result poststructuralist aesthetics arrives at — radical openness — is in my view insufficient as a critical concept, or at the very least, lacks refinement because it does not tell anything about the sublime itself, it only reflects on a potential repercussion of its epistemology. As it has been pointed out earlier, the critical notion of Bertens is neither novel, nor is it a meticulously elaborated concept. Perhaps this is not even simply semantics or the question of a more elaborate philological and philosophical analysis: the existence of sublimity and our perception of it reflect something of the transcendental realities in great art that eventually and perhaps for our sake remains unveiled in our human life.

However, these considerations had their origins in early 18<sup>th</sup>—century British aesthetics. The sublime of Longinus inspired many generations of philosophers, orators, and writers from the late Roman to modern times. Although the work of Longinus (entitled *Peri hypsous*, that is, *On the Sublime*) had been known in England since the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, as it was translated into Latin by two English authors (Langbaine 1636, Hall 1652). In the preface to his translation, John Hall emphasized the psychological, elevated, divine, and inspirational qualities of the sublime:

It must be therefore have somewhat I cannot tell how divine in it, for it depends not of the single amassing or embroidery of words, there must be in it, *excellent knowledge of Man, deep and studied acquaintance with the passions*, a man must not only know very perfectly the agitation of his own mind, but be sure and conversant in those others... And yet all this, without somewhat which I cannot express, is but the smallest part that goes to the building up of such a prodigy, there must be somewhat *Ethereal*, somewhat above man, much of *a soul separate*, that must animate all this, and breath [sic] into it a fire to make it both warm and shine.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Editio princeps in England: Gerard Langbaine (Oxford, 1636); first English translation by John Hall: *Peri Hypsous, or Dionysius Longinus of the Height of Eloquence rendered out of the originall by J. Hall Esq.* (1652). Republications: 1698, 1730, 1732, 1733, 1733, 1743, 1752.

However, more frequent allusions to the sublime appeared only after 1674 when Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux's work on Longinus (*Traité du sublime ou du merveilleux dans le discours traduit du grec de Longin*) was translated into English. French literary debates on the notion of sublimity also influenced early 18<sup>th</sup>-century British literary critics, who elaborated on the conceptualisation of the sublime so as to gradually transform it from its original, narrower and stricter rhetorical interpretation towards a more imaginative and empiricist psychological aesthetic category. Thus the early 18<sup>th</sup>-century concept of the sublime developed towards that aesthetic concept which finally became the major source of terror in the aesthetic theory of Burke and later authors. It is therefore essential to note that the Kantian and Burkean ideas of greatness, terror, and astonishment in the aesthetics of the sublime had a very firm source in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century classicist literary and rhetorical tradition.

Although the late 17<sup>th</sup>-century French literary debate and its English reception signalled a reinvigoration of the theory of the sublime, it did not lose its deeply rooted classical origins. In my view, this is also shown by the tendency that changes in 18<sup>th</sup>-century English interpretations of the sublime ran parallel to the altering interpretations of the work of Longinus. On the other hand, this process of aesthetic interpretation was neatly connected to the main tenets of British empiricism as well. With respect to periodization, it can be plausibly argued that from Boileau's reception to the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century the sublime was gradually transformed from a more formal, structural and rhetorical mode towards a psychological and empiricist, imaginative, less literary and more sensational one.<sup>40</sup> Within this process passion, enthusiasm and astonishment obtained higher values.

Nevertheless, beyond the traditions of French classicism and its own literary past, this development gained a further impetus from an other source as well. While Boileau had been having long debates with his adversaries on the nature of sublimity and his works had been rarely read, a considerable theological controversy emerged within the Anglican Church concerning the form of the Earth at the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup>—18<sup>th</sup> century. It was also the period when the old and new cosmologies clashed after the discovery of the new world with its wide-ranging consequences on the conceptions of the

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<sup>40</sup> Due to the limits of our paper, it cannot be discussed in detail. For a survey of this process see Samuel Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 1-62.

scientific-cosmological system. One theologian had a peculiarly profound effect on John Dennis. Thomas Burnet, the Court Chaplain, published his work with regard to the above mentioned cosmological debate (*Sacred Theory of the Earth*, 1681), which had repercussions not only on theology but also on aesthetics.<sup>41</sup> Burnet meticulously studied the ideas of the infinity of nature and the sublime from a religious perspective. In his work he claimed that the present world, that is, the world after the *Deluvium*,<sup>42</sup> with its numerous disproportions and asymmetries, is a deviation from the original symmetry of the divine creation, which was held to be the manifestation of perfect beauty. The theologian disdained the deviation from a religious point of view, but he could not help being enchanted by contemporary nature with its power, expansion and infinite greatness. He felt the same awe and fear when he meditated upon nature and God, yet he was unable to decipher the origins of his feelings regarding nature.<sup>43</sup> In turn, according to Burnet, human beings are capable of detecting these feelings when observing nature in its present disorderly state, which usually incites fear, reverence and wonder, which do not originate from beauty.<sup>44</sup> This present state of nature, however, retained sparks of divine inspiration:

The greatest Objects of Nature are, methinks, the / most pleasing to behold; and next to the Great / Conclave of Heavens and those boundless Regions / where the Stars inhabit, there is nothing that I / look upon with more Pleasure than the wide / Sea and The Mountains of the Earth.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas Burnet was originally the ministrant of Charterhouse, and after the “Glorious Revolution” the Court Chaplain of William III of Orange.

<sup>42</sup> In geologic time scale the term was used before the Pleistocene came into currency, and it was also used in theology to describe the period of the great flood of Biblical times.

<sup>43</sup> H. V. S. Ogden, “Thomas Burnet’s Telluris Theoria Sacra and Mountian Scenery,” *English Literary History* 14/2 (June 1947): 139-50.

<sup>44</sup> In all occasions, Burnet seemed to sense his emotions over Beauty and the greatness of nature sharply differently. The large and irregularly arranged mountains seemed to lack beauty, but — disregarding the night sky — nothing could move his soul so much as the mountains and nothing could conjure up the image of God and infinity as the mountains and the sea. See Ogden, “Thomas Burnet’s Telluris Theoria Sacra and Mountian Scenery,” 145-50.

<sup>45</sup> These are such early manifestations of emotions and imagination which indirectly influenced the literary aesthetics of Dennis, Addison, Warton and Wordsworth. The physicotheological conception of Burnet naturally linked God, infinity and natural sublimity at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, which are in turn the forerunners of the ethos of later subjective Romantic aesthetics. Burnett is quoted by Marjorie

Burnet did not explicitly call this sensation and its origin the sublime, but the scope of the phenomenon inevitably matches later theories. Nevertheless, John Dennis, the “national Critic” and *poeta laureatus* of the first decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, utilized Burnet’s ideas to the greatest extent.<sup>46</sup> Dennis pioneered in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to bring about a theory of sublimity originating from emotions. The English critic draws on Burnet’s distinction between the beautiful and the sublime,<sup>47</sup> and I think this close relation to the divine sphere and origins might also explain the emphasis on the role astonishment and terror play in the sublime. At the same time, as Ann T. Delehanty argues, these ‘psychological’ considerations were in turn largely ignored by French classical authors.<sup>48</sup> The English critic interpreted the sublime as an enthusiastic response which is religious in origin, while beauty as an ordinary response. Accordingly, as John Morillo has claimed, Dennis also stated that the source of all poetry was emotion, and that poetry itself aimed at inciting elevated emotions.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, as it will be shown in the following, instead of classifying them according to their abstract qualities, Dennis connects aesthetic reactions to the intensity of emotions.

As referred to above, Dennis had already differentiated between the beautiful and the sublime. In his view, beauty is *dulce*, an “ordinary aesthetic response”, an experience, which abounds in ordinary, non-reflective passions.<sup>50</sup> On the contrary, sublime is *pulchrum*, an enthusiastic aesthetic response, in which reflexion plays an active role.<sup>51</sup> The English critic endeavours to clarify the difference between the two aesthetic concepts. He proposes that sublimity cannot be generally defined because it has too many

Hope Nicholson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1959), 210-14.

<sup>46</sup> The texts used in this paper rely on the outstanding edition of the works of Dennis by E. N. Hooker. See: Edward Niles Hooker, *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, vols. 1-2 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1939-1943). In the following parts of the paper, all Dennis references and quotations are based on this edition.

<sup>47</sup> Hope Nicholson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*, 281.

<sup>48</sup> Ann T. Delehanty, “Mapping the Aesthetic Mind: John Dennis and Nicolas Boileau,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 68/2 (April 2007): 233-40.

<sup>49</sup> John Morillo, “John Dennis: Enthusiastic Passions, Cultural Memory, and Literary Theory,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34/1 (Fall 2000, Poetry and Poetics): 21-25.

<sup>50</sup> John Dennis, “Preface to *The Passion of Byblis*,” in *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. E. N. Hooker, vol. 1 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1939), 3.

<sup>51</sup> Dennis, “Preface to *The Passion of Byblis*,” 3.



sources.<sup>52</sup> Instead, Dennis sets out to grasp the sublime aesthetically according to the intensity of passions.

Since the only thing that is able to move the soul is emotion, so therefore it is the very foundation upon which poetry is built.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, poetry aims to incite the greatest and most powerful emotions; hence it needs grand and highly affective images. These are necessarily of religious origin. According to John Dennis, passion is an essential component of poetry and the greatest passions stand for the poetic genius, who is “the expression of a Furious Joy or Pride, or Astonishment”.<sup>54</sup> What is more, as the primary objective of the latter is to move, thus the main aim of poetry is also to incite the greatest passions.<sup>55</sup> Poetry originates from nature, it imitates the latter: “Poetry then is an imitation of Nature by a Pathetick and Numerous Speech”.<sup>56</sup>

The poet who is capable of imitating nature while inciting great passions unites the characteristics proper to the rhetorical sublime:

exalted Wit; Man of high Condition; Man of Courtly Mind. [...] the Writer [...] must have some qualities at the time of writing, which are rarely to be found together, as Precipitation and Address, Boldness and Decency, Sublimeness and Clearness, Fury and Sense.<sup>57</sup>

Thus the rhetorical aspect is also present in the conceptualisation of Dennis. It can be further pointed out by referring to how Dennis outlines the possible errors of the *bombast* and the *fustian* that can mar the sublime:

But 'tis time to consider how far Pindar may be imitated in our Language and Climate. An English Writer may endeavor to imitate him in several of his greatest

<sup>52</sup> Theodore E. B. Wood, *The Word 'Sublime' And Its Context (1660-1760)* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton & Co., 1972), 169-70.

<sup>53</sup> See his two most important essays, *The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry* (1701) and *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704), passim.

<sup>54</sup> John Dennis, “The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry,” in *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. E. N. Hooker, vol. 1 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1939), 222.

<sup>55</sup> It is unknown to what extent Dennis relied on Longinus, because the appendix of Longinus on passions had unfortunately been lost.

<sup>56</sup> John Dennis, “Preface to *Miscellanies in Verse and Prose*,” in *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. E. N. Hooker, vol. 1 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1939), 6.

<sup>57</sup> Dennis, “Preface to *Miscellanies in Verse and Prose*,” 6.

qualities, by the Genius of our Nation, which is bold and sublime, as Mr. Waller has observ'd. But then he ought to be discreet in his boldness; for our Language is not capable of some of the most violent figures of Pindar; and in aiming at two of his principal qualities, which are his Sublimity and his Magnificence, he ought carefully to avoid two things, and those are Fustian and Superfluity of Epithetes [...] it may serve for an eternal rule, that there can be no Fustian, for a man of Sense must have a very fantastick opinion of himself, if he thinks that the false Sublime can warm him.<sup>58</sup>

John Dennis, in line with Longinus, describes sublimity as the expression of a great idea, which incites reverence, awe, delight and terror, sometimes even sorrow, but on all occasion desire. In his literary aesthetics it is the category of enthusiastic passion that encompasses all these.<sup>59</sup> Human passions lead to enthusiasm, which is in turn the engine of the sublime:

Enthusiastick Passion, or Enthusiasm, is a Passion which is moved by Ideas in Contemplation, or the Meditation of things that belong not to common life. Most of our thoughts in Meditation are naturally attended with some sort and some degree of Passion, and this Passion, if it is strong, I call Enthusiasm. (...) for the *sublime* is nothing else but a great Thought, or great Thoughts, moving the Soul from its ordinary Situation by the Enthusiasm which naturally attend them.<sup>60</sup>

Hereby, it is worth revisiting the similar formulation of this idea by Longinus: "For I would make bold to say that nothing contributes to greatness as much as noble passion in the right place; it breathes the frenzied spirit of its inspiration upon the words and makes them, as it were, prophetic".<sup>61</sup> Additionally, in the *Prologue to Aureng-Zebe*, John Dryden also alludes to this function of passions: "Grows weary of his long—liv'd mistress, Rhyme / Passion's too fierce to be in fetters bound, / And nature flies him like enchanted ground".<sup>62</sup> However, the emphasis on emotions and affective aesthetics

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<sup>58</sup> John Dennis, "Preface to *The Court of Death*," in *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. E. N. Hooker, vol. 1. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1939), 42-44.

<sup>59</sup> Morillo, "John Dennis: Enthusiastic Passions, Cultural Memory, and Literary Theory," 32-34.

<sup>60</sup> Dennis, "The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry," 222.

<sup>61</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, Section 8, 4.

<sup>62</sup> John Dryden, *Prologue to Aureng-Zebe*, 2, 7-10. For the quotation and its context see Paul H. Fry, "Dryden's Earliest Allusion to Longinus," *English Language Notes* (September 1981): 22-24.

does not mean that rhetoric disappears. Hereby it is also worth noting how the rhetorical tradition is combined with this new and widening interpretation conceived by Dennis, for enthusiastic passion can only incite sublimity through concealed rhetorical figures and tropes (*schemata dianoeias et lexeos*):

But these are Figures [in the Psalm of Sternhold] which are another Person's which the Transverser repeats like Parrot, without the understanding them, and without being mov'd by them, and which consequently have neither Passion nor Sublimity to sustain them. For 'tis a just Observation which is made by Longinus, that as the Figures support the pathetick and the sublime, they are wonderfully supported by each of them. Let us now see how the Force of Milton's Genius hides and conceals the Assistance of Art, while these lofty Figures, at the very time that they raise and transport his exalted Soul, are lost in his Enthusiasm and his Sublimity, as the glittering of numberless Stars is swallow'd and lost in the blaze of Day, and that golden Deluge of Light which on every side overwhelms them.<sup>63</sup>

Nevertheless, Dennis reinterprets the sublime, when he lays an emphasis on terror, which is considered by Longinus as a negative and inferior emotion. What is more, the English critic associates terror with religious ideas. Terror is:

a Disturbance of Mind, proceeding from an Apprehension of an approaching Evil, threatening Destruction or very great Trouble either to us or ours. And When the Disturbance comes suddenly with surprize, let us call it Terror; and when gradually, Fear. Things then that are powerful, and likely to hurt, are the Causes of Common Terror, and the more they are powerful, and likely to hurt, the more they become the cause of Terror; which Terror, the greater it is, the more it is joined with Wonder, and the nearer it comes to Astonishment: Thus we have shewn what Objects of the Mind are the Causes of Enthusiastick Terror...<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> John Dennis, "Of Simplicity in Poetical Compositions, in Remarks on the 70th Spectator," in *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. E. N. Hooker, vol. 2. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1943), 39.

<sup>64</sup> John Dennis, "The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry," in *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. E. N. Hooker, vol. 1. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1939), 361-363.

According to Dennis, the most effective passion is terror itself. He encapsulates this idea in his preface to *Rinaldo and Armida*:

I resolv's therefore, to do my Endeavor to treat this Subject, with something at least, of that at once Sublime and Pathetick Air, which reigns in the renown'd Sophocles. I resolv'd to use some Effort to make the Greatness of the Sentiments, and of the Images, answer to the Height of the Subject; and the Dignity of the Expression, to the Greatness of the Sentiments. I design'd in this Poem, to make Terror the prevailing Passion, which is likewise the predominant Passion in that admirable Greek.<sup>65</sup>

Dennis thought that Longinus missed terror as the principal source of the sublime. Although rhetorical figures and tropes do contribute to the sublime, they are far from being the sources of it. Instead, the main fountain sublime springs from is the religious spirit referred to above. In order to clarify what Dennis meant by this, it is worth looking at how he interpreted Lucretius as an Epicurean philosopher while referring to Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

But it is not only in his Invocation, that Lucretius is pleas'd to have Recourse to Religion: For after that in the Two First Books, he has been taking a great deal of pains to destroy the Belief in gods and Providence, that in his Third he may be very Poetical, and very Sublime, he is forc'd to erect a new Divinity in the Room of those whom he has been just subverting, and that is Nature; tho' by what he makes her say, in that noble Prosopopoeia, we might very well mistake her for Providence. [...] Indeed, sometimes he (Lucretius) was so, for I do not remember, that I affirmed, that there can be no Poetry without Religion, but only, that Religion gives Occasion for the best, the greatest, and the most exalted, and it makes for my purpose sufficiently, that Lucretius is most Poetical and Sublime, where he is Religious.<sup>66</sup>

And such are the Thoughts concerning God, which are spread thro that Divine Dialogue between God and Adam, in the Eighth Book of the same Poem (*Paradise Lost*): I believe the Reader will pardon the length if I repeat it, which I am

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<sup>65</sup> John Dennis, "Preface to *Rinaldo and Armida*," in *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. E. N. Hooker, vol. 1. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1939), 195.

<sup>66</sup> Dennis, "The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry," 250.

very much inclin'd to do, not only because I challenge the most zealous Admirers of Antiquity to produce any thing like it, from among all the Dialogues in Homer and Virgil, that are either between one God and another; but because the Reader who sees the Inequalities in it, will easily see that it derives its Greatness and its Sublimity from the becoming Thoughts which it has of the Deity. [...] The Reader may easily see, that here (Adam's description to Raphael of God in Paradise Lost VIII) is all that is great and sublime in Reason, express'd with the Spirit of that just Admiration, with which such worthy Thoughts of the Deity must naturally fill the Soul.<sup>67</sup>

Thus, Sublime appears as a combined effect of *enthusiastick Passion*, which reflects the Longinian idea of the sublime, uniting passion, emotion, great thought and loftiness. However, contrary to Longinus, for John Dennis the sublime is never possible without *Enthusiastick Passion*.<sup>68</sup> While the Greek philosopher and writer pointed out that a certain emotional disturbance or passion is irrelevant concerning the sublime in arts, Dennis thought that Longinus was unable to recognise religious passion and terror as the major sources of the sublime:

[...] it seems plain to me, that Longinus had no clear and distinct Idea of it; and consequently Religion might be the thing from which 'tis chiefly to be deriv'd, and he but obscurely know it [...] that which is truly Sublime has this peculiar to it, that it exalts the Soul, and makes it conceive a greater Idea of it self, filling it with Joy, and with a certain noble Pride, as if it self had produc'd what it but barely reads.<sup>69</sup>

Consequently, what is mostly capable of creating sublime is *Enthusiastick Terror* which are most of all incited by religious ideas. Dennis describes the latter as *terrible ideas*, which ravish and awe the reader or the audience, and call forth awe and astonishment. This is the moment when the human ability of the controlling of the mind and rational reflection cease to exist:

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<sup>67</sup> Dennis, "The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry," 342, 344.

<sup>68</sup> For more examples, see Monk, *The Sublime*, 47-48, 52.

<sup>69</sup> Dennis, "The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry," 359-60.

And therefore Reason, which serves to dissipate our Terror in some other Dangers, serves but to augment them when we are threatened by infinite Power; and that Fortitude, which may be heroick at other times, is downright Madness then [...] 'Tis very plain that it is the Apprehension of Danger which causes that Emotion in us which we call Terror, and it signifies nothing at all to the purpose whether the Danger is real and imaginary... For the warmer the Imagination is, the less able we are to reflect, and consequently the things are the more present to us of which we draw the Images; and therefore when the Imagination is so inflam'd, as to render the Soul utterly incapable of reflecting, there is no difference between the Images and the Things themselves...<sup>70</sup>

Thus it can be plausibly argued that from the perspective of the observer or the recipient it is indifferent whether the danger is real or imaginary, because it rather depends on the degree of being endangered. If the sublime does not threaten with imminent physical destruction, then it can lead to the feeling of delightful terror. In consequence, terror and the sublime are not incompatible for Dennis, contrary to Longinus, though they are not synonyms, since sublimity is terror distanced. In my view, it is the point in the development of the idea of the sublime in 18<sup>th</sup>—century British aesthetics, where Dennis can be seen as a forerunner of Edmund Burke. Nevertheless, Dennis is primarily interested in how imagination works when it associates things with their images.

...we may plainly see by the foregoing Precepts and Examples of Longinus, that this Enthusiastick Terror contributes extremely to the Sublime; and, secondly, that it is most produced by Religious Ideas. [...] First, Ideas producing Terror contribute extremely to the Sublime. All the Examples that Longinus brings of the Loftiness of the Thought, consist of terrible Ideas. And they are principally such Ideas that work the Effects, which he takes notice of in the beginning of his Treatise, viz. that ravish and transport the Reader, and produce a certain Admiration, mingled with Astonishment and with Surprise. For the Ideas which produce Terror, are necessarily accompany'd with Admiration, because ev'ry thing that is terrible, is great to him to whom it is terrible; and with Surprise, without which Terror cannot subsist; and with Astonishment, because every thing which is very terrible, is wonderful and astonishing: And as Terror is perhaps the violentest of all

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<sup>70</sup> Dennis, "The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry," 363.

Passions, it consequently makes an Impression which we cannot resist, and which is hardly to be defaced: and no Passion is attended with greater Joy than Enthusiastick Terror, which proceeds from our reflecting that we are out of danger at the very time that we see it before us. And as Terror is one of the violentest of all Passions, if it is very great, and the hardest to be resisted, nothing gives more Force, nor more Vehemence to a Discourse. [...] Now of all these Ideas none are so terrible as those which shew the Wrath and Vengeance of an angry God; for nothing is so wonderful in its Effects: and consequently the Images or Ideas of those Effects must carry a great deal of Terror with them, which we may see was Longinus's Opinion, by the Examples which he brings in his Chapter of the Sublimity of the Thoughts. [...] But further, nothing is so terrible as the Wrath of infinite Power [God], because nothing is so unavoidable as the Vengeance design'd by it. [...] 'Tis very plain that it is the Apprehension of Danger which causes that Emotion in us which we call Terror, and it signifies nothing at all to the purpose whether the Danger is real or imaginary. [...] For the warmer the Imagination is, the less able we are to reflect, and consequently the things are the more present to us of which we draw the Images; and therefore when the Imagination is so inflam'd, as to render the Soul utterly incapable of reflecting, there is no difference between the Images and the Things themselves.<sup>71</sup>

Dennis enhances religious awe which can be detected in the Longinian concept as well, concerning Longinus' metaphor of light and creation in particular. Dennis also lays an emphasis on wonder and astonishment among the psychological effects of terror. It is important because, on the one hand, in line with Edmund Burke, Dennis asserts terror as the most important passion accompanying sublimity connected to God, on the other hand, concerning terror, he perceives both real and imaginary dangers as sources of terror, again similarly to Burke. Hence, a 'psychological' interpretation of the sublime appears. The uncertainty established between the aesthetic perspective and the theological concept (fear of God) "threatens" with the disappearance of any kind of distance, and this uncertainty and distancing enables the differentiation of terror and sublime.

The thoughts of Dennis clearly show how the rhetorical tradition of the sublime began to transform into an empirically based psychological interpretation.<sup>72</sup> It had its

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<sup>71</sup> Dennis, "The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry," 361-63.

<sup>72</sup> Delehanty, "Mapping the Aesthetic Mind: John Dennis and Nicolas Boileau," 241-45.

origins by Longinus when he called attention to the imminent force of imagination. However, it is John Dennis in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, who managed to widen the Longinian rhetorical sublime. The English critic elevated terror and religious passion (the idea of God and *Enthusiastick Terror*) as primary sources of the sublime. What is more, he also began to explore the distinct characteristics and excessive depth of the relations and reactions of senses and emotions. Although Dennis remained within the bounds of neoclassical literary aesthetics by emphasising rhetorical efficiency in carrying out the sublime effect, yet he also presents the neat intricacy human sensibility and psychology might yield to the aesthetics of the sublime, which is eventually systematised by Edmund Burke in his *Enquiry*. The unique, early 18<sup>th</sup>-century aesthetic 'revelations' of Dennis had, however, relatively low impact on his contemporaries. The reason for not many people reading Dennis is trivial: after the death of John Dryden only a few years elapsed, when the 'title' of *poeta laureatus* was seized in 1711 by the greatest contemporary and personal literary adversary of Dennis, Alexander Pope.

In conclusion, the source and explanation residing within the affective power of the sublime are thoroughly mapped and explained which are later described by Kant even more meticulously. However, it had its origins in classical conceptions of the sublime. The classical tradition was reinterpreted and transmitted by Longinus whose work (*Peri hypsous*) reinvigorated French and British classicist literary debates. It has been argued that within this process the aesthetic theory of Dennis holds a similar proposition as repeated and reinterpreted in Burke's and Kant's theories: a scheme which serves as a representation of the unity of terror, astonishment and joy on a deeper, half-subconscious level (*sub-limen*). In this reflective and affective aesthetic interpretation the reality of the sub-limen, therefore, cannot be perceived directly — it is non-real and ontologically transcendental; hence an invention of the reality of the sublime becomes possible in the human mind. The sublime opens up a vista for gaining an aesthetic though valid knowledge of the world, through the 'terroristic' aspect of sublimity.

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